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JOURNALISM AND PERMANENCE

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD

THERE are many obstacles to the production of literature of high and permanent quality in America, but probably the greatest is the immense development of current journalism. This is something the classical writers did not have to contend with. Sophocles was not tempted from the stage with the offer of big money for sketches of Athenian politicians, nor was it ever suggested to Cervantes that *Don Quixote* might be serialized and syndicated.

To-day many of the best books find an easy road to success and popularity through being hacked in pieces and sold in neat, wrapped, labeled sections, like chewing-gum. How can an author think at once of the rounded perfection and continuity of an entire work and of the detachment of effective specimens, each of which shall be complete in itself and calculated to inspire a jaded public with eager longing for more of the same kind?

It is well known that journalism encourages superficiality, but perhaps few appreciate to how great an extent. Journalism creates superficial readers. Unfortunately, the immense growth of modern knowledge in all branches makes an intelligent superficiality a necessary requisite of education. The man who reads line for line and word for word is in these days stranded on a desert island. Everybody must make a dart for useful information and snatch it where he can. But sound mental discipline requires that this versatility should be tempered by a certain amount of slow, steady, thoughtful, drudging application. Now the newspapers and current magazines do not encourage this—they do not even admit of it. Who would plod through a page of a great daily? Who could? Instead, we are trained to run diagonally from top to bottom between two mouthfuls,

or in the midst of an inquiry as to the neighbor's baby. Nothing takes our attention but what is thrown at it; nothing really stimulates our thought but a leaded head-line or a staring picture.

And the superficiality of readers inevitably breeds a corresponding superficiality in writers. Of what use is long meditation, exact research, the careful sifting of arguments, when nobody knows or cares? One or two facts must hit, must count, must tell. As to these, you have to be terribly sure; otherwise you will suffer for it. But the expert soon learns where the strain comes, puts all his thought on that, and patches up the rest from any handy source in books or fancy.

Here is a strange thing, too: You would think this wild hurry of writers and readers would at least foster one of the chief literary merits—brevity. Quite the contrary. Our newspapers are one of the wonders of the world for size—and padding. Why is it that when most of us want to read only the headlines, and should apparently be satisfied with head-lines and nothing else, every newspaper is stuffed with column after column of amplification which seems to add little to the few essential words printed at the top? The reason is obvious. It is precisely because we have acquired such a happy facility in the art of skipping that we are perpetually invited to skip—like little lambs. I want to satiate myself with baseball, you with the cotton-market, Jones with politics, Mrs. Jones with murder. We can each of us make perfect brevity of the others' interests. But brevity for the paper as a whole would be quite out of the question.

The best, indeed, the only fundamental remedy for this decay of literature under the influence of journalism, is the cultivation of conscience and ambition. It is true that it seems a waste of conscience to do good work for the housemaid to make fires with. But Warburton's cook made fires with unique manuscripts of Shakespeare. It is true that the gaping image of posterity, created by much experience with the skipping approval of the average newspaper reader, makes glory seem not so much hard to get as not worth getting. Yet serious, thoughtful, intelligent people still read and will read, and the more hopeful among us still believe that such readers are posterity.

When we consider more in detail, there are three points which the active journalist who dreams of doing something

permanent should keep before him. First, there is the question of subject. And here he has comparatively little choice. If he wants to write for the public, he must write on what interests the public. There are a thousand odd corners he would like to probe, a thousand things that interest him and should interest the public. But they do not. The question of God lacks actuality, said the French editor. Other things of some importance lack actuality, which sticks like a burr to things of no importance at all. Editors and contributors both must make sacrifice at the altar of the tawdry idol, timeliness. But this at least you can do: you can know what you are writing about. Make for yourself a specialty—or two, or three, specialties.

Then there is that indefinable, that immortalizing element, style. Style is nothing in the world but the best and most effective way of saying things. It is style that makes literature to-day of the work of those two journalists, Voltaire and Macaulay. But in style, more than in anything else, the good is the enemy of the best. Our average journalistic product is well enough written, clearly written, sometimes it hits hard. But it lacks originality. It lacks sincerity. It is all plastered over with a crust of conventional phraseology which comes from conventional thought. If you want to do anything permanent, you must scratch off this crust, burn it off, fling it off. Keep the great masters of style constantly before you, many of them and many different ones; and, if possible, learn to think and feel a little for yourself.

One thing more. If you want to write for permanence, live always with the permanent things. A current subject may be treated so completely on its surface that what you write deserves to be forgotten before you have written it. But every current subject is rooted somehow in permanence. God is permanent, in spite of French editors. Truth is permanent. Above all, human nature, with its hope and its passion and its suffering, is permanent. Every timely subject, no matter how trivial, is related to these things and to others as enduring. See that you get hold of such relations, as you can if your own nature is steeped in permanence. Then you will write about the commonest matters of to-day under the aspect of eternity; and eternity, or as much of it as you deserve, will listen to you.

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